

## A Conceptual Framework for Sustainability in Islamic Architecture: The Significance of the Concepts of Man and the Environment

Spahic Omer\*

**Abstract:**

This article identifies and briefly examines two Islamic concepts which constitute the nucleus of the conceptual framework for sustainability in Islamic architecture. The two concepts are: 1) man as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth, and 2) natural environment as both a field and means for man's vicegerency mission. Central to the article are the following themes: 1) the meaning and significance of Islamic architecture; 2) the position and role of man on earth; 3) peaceful and accountable (sustainable) coexistence with the environment; and 4) the implications of the Islamic concepts of man and the environment for sustainability in Islamic architecture. The article concludes by presenting some broad ideas as to the issue of pragmatism in practising Islamic architecture today.

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\* Associate Professor at Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. E-mail: spahico@yahoo.com.

**Keywords:**

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**Introduction: what is Islamic architecture?**

Islamic architecture is an architecture whose functions and, to a lesser extent, form, are inspired primarily by Islām. Islamic architecture is a framework for the implementation of Islām. It facilitates, fosters and stimulates the Muslims' *'ibādah* (worship) activities, which, in turn, account for every moment of their earthly lives. Islamic architecture only can come into existence under the aegis of the Islamic perceptions of God, man, nature, life, death and the Hereafter. Thus, Islamic architecture would be the facilities and, at the same time, a physical locus of the actualisation of the Islamic message. Practically, Islamic architecture represents the religion of Islām that has been translated onto reality at the hands of Muslims. It also represents the identity of Islamic culture and civilisation.

Ibn 'Abdūn, an Andalusian judge from the twelfth century, is reported to have said—as quoted by Stefano Bianca: “As far as architecture is concerned, it is the haven where man's spirit, soul and body find refuge and shelter.” In other words, architecture is a container of people's lives.<sup>1</sup> Also, Ibn Qutayba, a Muslim scholar of the ninth century, compared the house—as quoted by Afif Bahnassi—to that of a shirt, saying that just as the shirt should fit its owner, the house too should suit its dwellers.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the aesthetic and utilitarian ends of the house must correspond to the needs and capabilities of its users. The two must perfectly suit each other.

1 Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World* (London; New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

2 Afif Bahnassi, “The Islamic Architecture and its Specificities in Teaching Curricula,” available at [www.isesco.org.ma/pub/Eng/Islarch/P2.htm](http://www.isesco.org.ma/pub/Eng/Islarch/P2.htm).

Central to Islamic architecture is function with all of its dimensions: corporeal, cerebral and spiritual. The form divorced from function is inconsequential. This, however, by no means implies that the form plays no role in Islamic architecture. It does play a prominent role, but its relevance is a supportive one supplementing and enhancing function. The form is important, but in terms of value and substance, it always comes second to function and its wide scope. There must be the closest relationship between the ideals that underpin the form of buildings and the ideals that underpin their function, with which the users of buildings must be at ease. A rift or conflict between the two is bound to lead to a conflict of some far-reaching psychological proportions in buildings users. This way, the roles of form become equivalent to the roles of function.

Islamic architecture promotes unity in diversity, that is, the unity of message and purpose, and the diversity of styles, methods and solutions. Certainly, this renders Islamic architecture so relevant and dynamic, and so consistent and adaptable. It is such a fascinating subject to study, for doing so is not about sheer art and architecture. It is more than that: it is about beholding the Islamic ideology and creed at work. It is about witnessing a microcosm of Islamic society, civilisation and culture. Islamic architecture is about Islām taking up a manifest form.

The identity and vocabulary of Islamic architecture evolved as a means for the fulfilment of the concerns of Muslim societies. Islamic architecture was never an end in itself. It was the container of Islamic culture and civilisation reflecting the cultural identity and the level of the Muslims' creative and aesthetic consciousness. Hence, at the core of a genuine Islamic architecture must always rest the notion of sustainability and sustainable development.

Architecture, in general, should always be in service to people. It is never to be the other way round, that is to say that architecture should evolve into a hobby or an adventure in the process imposing itself on society while forsaking, or taking lightly, people's identities, cultures and the demands of their daily struggles. Architecture, first and foremost, should remain associated with functionality. It should not deviate from its authentic character and stray into the world of excessive invention and abstraction.<sup>3</sup>

Alfred Frazer, as reported by M. A. J. Beg, said about the fundamental nature of Islamic architecture: "The architecture of Islām is the expression of a religion and its view of the world rather than that of a particular people or political or economic system."<sup>4</sup>

In the same vein, Titus Burckhardt also wrote that it is not surprising, nor strange, that the most outward manifestation of Islām as a religion and civilisation reflects in its own fashion what is most inward in it. The same author further remarked:

If one were to reply to the question 'What is Islām?' by simply pointing to one of the masterpieces of Islamic art such as, for example, the Mosque of Cordova, or that of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, or one of the madrasahs in Samarqand...that reply, summary as it is, would be nonetheless valid, for the art of Islām expresses what its name indicates, and it does so without ambiguity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Islām and the role of man on earth**

Man, according to Islām, is a vicegerent on earth entrusted

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3 Bianca, *Urban Form*.

4 M. A. J. Beg, ed., *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981).

5 Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd, 1976).

with the honourable task of inhabiting it in accordance with the divine guidance given to him. This terrestrial life serves to man as a platform for either elevating his status over that of angels, should he abide by the divinely prescribed rules and regulations, or for debasing his self lower than the rank of animals, should he turn away from Truth, dazed and lost and wander aimlessly amid the innumerable and awesome wonders of creation.

God created man with the primordial natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) to thirst for and worship his Creator. God, therefore, knowing best the character of man, his needs and weaknesses, on sending Adam and Eve to earth to assume the duty of vicegerency, revealed to them that He will never forsake them and their progeny. God promised that His guidance and signs will be coming to them, and “Whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve”<sup>6</sup> and, “... Whosoever follows My guidance, will not lose his way, nor fall in misery.”<sup>7</sup>

God’s guidance and signs mean the religion of Islām preached by every prophet from the dawn of mankind and Adam as the first messenger to Muhammad as the last and seal of all messengers. God’s divine guidance will enable man to remain strong, sensible, content and “healthy” while on earth, making him, in turn, capable of keeping up the focus of his undertakings on worshipping his Lord in every act, word and thought (*‘ibādah*). God says in the Qur’ān that He has created both *Jinns* and men only that they may serve Him.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, in the event of man’s rejection of God’s message and guidance, the repercussions will be costly.

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6 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 38. Throughout this article, unless indicated otherwise, the translation of the Qur’ānic verses is based on Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’ān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* (Medina: King Fahd Holy Qur’ān Printing Complex, 1410 H).

7 *Tā Hā* (20): 123.

8 *Al-Dhāriyāt* (51): 56.

The Qurʾān says: “But those who reject Faith and belie Our Signs, they shall be Companions of the Fire; they shall abide therein.”<sup>9</sup> It also says, “But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily, for him is a life narrowed down, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Judgment.”<sup>10</sup>

Man is created as a social being endowed with free will, passion and emotions, which could either lead him to the highest or drag him to the lowest ebb of creation. Humanity is but a big family with the same origin, mission and purpose. People have been divided into nations and tribes only to know one another, learn from one another, and cooperate at various scales in righteousness and piety, not that they may loathe one another and conspire against one another. They are to explore the universe and, within the framework rendered by revelation, try to make their existence as convenient, comfortable and meaningful as possible, hence, create virtuous cultures and civilisations. However, no sooner does this universal equilibrium become impaired and vitiated than man’s relationship with God, his peers and the whole of the environment starts to degenerate. Allāh says about this:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allāh is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allāh has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).<sup>11</sup>

Also, in the following verse, He says: “And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily, in that are Signs for

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9 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 39.

10 *Tā Hā* (20): 124.

11 *Al-Hujurat* (49): 13.

those who know.”<sup>12</sup>

Islām with its unique *tawhīdic* (the unity of God) worldview champions that Muslims are brothers to one another and their similitude is like a wall whose bricks enforce and rely on one another. They are like a solid cemented structure held together in unity and strength, each part contributing strength in its own way, and the whole are held together, unlike a mass, as a living organism. Muslims are, furthermore, related to one another in such a way that if one of them (a part of an organic and formidable formation called the *Ummah* or the Community) is troubled by a problem of any kind, the rest of the body parts will remain disturbed and restless until the matter is fairly solved.

### **Islām and the environment**

This unique Islamic perception of man and his position on earth necessitated the formation of a compelling and comprehensive view of the natural environment as well. This is so because man totally depends on nature for his survival. Also, nature is a ground for man’s realisation of his spiritual purpose on earth. Simply put, man is an integral part of the total natural setting. Man is nature himself, sustaining nature means sustaining his self, damaging nature means damaging his self and his prospects of a civilisational triumph. Owing to all this, Islām attaches much importance to the subject of environment, clearly expounding man’s rights over it and his responsibilities towards it.

Islām teaches that the environment is part of the universal web of creation. Its role is two-fold: to worship its Creator (in ways suitable to it), and to be subjected to serve the exigencies of man, so that God’s vicegerent can smoothly and, undeterred, carry out his honourable task of managing earth.

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12 *Al-Rūm* (30): 22.

The environment holds enormous potential and diversified resources meant only for the vicegerent of earth. They are to be seen as facilities which, if rightly used, facilitate each and every facet of man's fleeting stay on earth. The environment is further to be seen by man as an "ally" or a "partner" in the execution of his earthly mission. After all, in order to create any piece of his built environment, which serves as a framework for his activities, man borrows diverse natural ingredients, such as space, water, clay, timber, stone and other substances, placing the newly created or built elements back into the existing natural contexts. In reality, built environment is, in so many ways, the natural environment which has been processed and manipulated.

According to a number of divine instructions, natural diversity and the forces of nature are to be the focus of man's exhaustive scientific and contemplative attention. Diversity in humans: skin colours, languages, attitudes and cultures, are to preoccupy the cognitive faculties of men as well, thus, trying to find a link between it and the former. In all natural phenomena, a great deal of wisdom lies and awaits to be unearthed.

In Islām, man's rights over the environment are rights of sustainable use based on moderation, balance and conservation. The rights of the environment over man, on the other hand, are that it be safe from every misuse, mistreatment and destruction. Greed, extravagance and waste are considered a tyranny against nature and a transgression of those rights.<sup>13</sup>

Islām teaches that all things have been created with purpose and in proportion and measure, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Nature's resources and forces are gifts granted by God to man. At the same time, however, the natural environment is a field for man's vicegerency mission.

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13 Abd al-Hamid, "Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. Ins. A. R. Aqwan (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Study, 1997), 39-69.



It is right there, while interacting with different aspects of the environment, that people clearly demonstrate how strong, or how deficient, their relationship with God is. So significant is man's relationship with the environment in Islām that in some instances, such a relationship is able to take precedence over other deeds of man, placing him then on the highest level or dragging him to the lowest.

Furthermore, the environment stands for a source of man's spiritual enlightenment, provided that his treatment of it is apt and derived from divine teachings, in that the environment, in its totality, is an expression of God's Presence, Oneness, Mercy and Supremacy. By the power of reason and insight that has been accorded to him to subdue the forces of nature, man, at the same time, will be able to penetrate through and grasp properly nature's countless mysteries and phenomena. Consequently, this will lead to a considerable enhancement of his physical well-being, as well as to expediting the process of his spiritual advancement.

Finally, the environment, in a sense, participates in revealing Truth to man. It is, in fact, a revelation in itself. Therefore, in addition to having the composed or written Qur'ān (*al-qur'ān al-tadwīnī*), there is a cosmic or ontological "Qur'ān" (*al-qur'ān al-takwīnī*) as well. Both revelations complement each other, as it were, in furnishing man with the necessary substance so as not to let him betray the trust of productively inhabiting the earth which he had wittingly accepted. It follows that those who fully submit to the Divine Will, read, understand and apply the written Qur'ān, will easily see upon the face of every creature "letters" and "words," or messages, from the "pages" of the cosmic Qur'ān. For this reason are the phenomena of nature referred to in the Qur'ān as signs or symbols (*āyat*), a term that is also used for the verses of the Qur'ān.<sup>14</sup>

14 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Environmental Crisis," in *Islam*

The following are some verses from the Qurʾān on the discussed aspects of the environment:

Do not you see that to Allāh prostrate all things that are in the heavens and on earth,—the sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the trees, the animals, and a great number among mankind? But a great number are (also) such as unto whom the chastisement is justly due. And such as Allāh shall disgrace,—none can raise to honor: for Allāh carries out all that He wills.<sup>15</sup>

See you the seed that you sow in the ground? Is it you that cause it to grow, or are We the Cause? Were it Our Will, We could make it broken of sorts. And you would be left in wonderment... See you the water which you drink? Do you bring it down (in rain) from the cloud or do We? Were it Our Will, We could make it saltish (and unpalatable): then why do you not give thanks?<sup>16</sup>

O you people! Worship your Guardian Lord, Who created you and those who came before you that you may become righteous; Who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto Allāh when you know (the truth).<sup>17</sup>

“And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold, in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect.”<sup>18</sup>

## The importance of built environment

The implications of the concept of man as the vicegerent

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*and the Environment*, ed. Ins. A. R. Aqwan (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Study, 1997), 5-20.

15 *Al-Hajj* (22): 18.

16 *Al-Wāqʿah* (56): 63-70.

17 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 21-22.

18 *Al-Jāthiyah* (45): 13.

(*khalīfah*) and his interaction with nature for architecture are both ideological and practical. To begin with, humans are not the only creatures that build. Many a creature that we classify low in the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, such as bees and ants, build elaborate structures. However, it has been suggested that it is awareness and imagination that single out humans as superior to other animals in architectural output.<sup>19</sup> While the rest of creation act on the environment instinctively with no reasoning or training, man does the same willingly and at his own discretion. Since his actions are preceded with thinking and rationalising, man clearly demonstrates through acts of building and—through every other engagement of—his philosophy of, and outlook on, life's realities.

Based on his free will, awareness and imagination, man builds edifices in various shapes and sizes and with various function patterns, in order to facilitate, nurture and motivate his copious life activities. In fact, such is of the fundamental things that distinguish man from other animate creatures that share this earth with him. The existence of man cannot be imagined without the existence of a built environment. The relationship between the two is causal, man always being the cause and built environment the effect. Therefore, no phase of man's presence on earth could be imagined to be devoid of building activities, irrespective of their scale, simplicity and sophistication.

This principle applies to all including the very first man and prophet on earth, Adam, who is said to have built the first house of worship, the *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* or *Baytullāh* (the House of God). Exactly forty years following the completion of the *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām*, either Adam himself or some of his descendants, were instructed to proceed to a designated

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19 Michael Parker and Colin Richards, "Ordering the World: Perceptions of Architecture, Space and Time," in *Architecture & Order*, ed. Michael Parker and Colin Richards (London: Routledge, 1994).

location (later Jerusalem or *Bayt al-Maqdis*), and build there the *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*<sup>20</sup>, the second mosque on earth.

Ibn Khaldūn rightly observes that building is a basis of civilisation, and is of the most indispensable crafts which man ought to gain knowledge of:

This (architecture) is the first and oldest craft of sedentary civilization. It is the knowledge of how to go about using houses and mansions for cover and shelter. This is because man has the natural disposition to reflect upon the outcome of things. Thus, it is unavoidable that he must reflect upon how to avert the harm arising from heat and cold by using houses which have walls and roofs to intervene between him and those things on all sides. This natural disposition to think, which is the real meaning of humanity, exists among (men) in different degrees....<sup>21</sup>

Le Corbusier also remarked:

Architecture is one of the most urgent needs of man, for the house has always been the indispensable and first tool that he has forged for himself. Man's stock of tools marks out the stages of civilization, the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age. Tools are the result of successive improvement; the effort of all generations is embodied in them. The tool is the direct and immediate expression of progress; it gives man essential assistance and essential freedom also...<sup>22</sup>

And Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, said:

It is obvious and proven to men of intelligence and

20 *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), tradition no. 3172.

21 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, vol. 2. (London: Rotledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

22 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, translated from the thirteenth French edition with an introduction by Frederick Etchells (Oxford: Reed Educational and Professional Publishing Ltd, 1989).

wisdom and persons of understanding and vision that building with water and clay being an auspicious art, the Children of Adam felt an aversion to mountains and caves and from the beginning were inclined to cities and villages. And because human beings are by nature civilized, they invented day-by-day many types of buildings, and refinement increased.<sup>23</sup>

While erecting buildings for himself, God's vicegerent on earth, in fact, creates a wide range of facilities which are aimed at smoothing the progress of the realisation of his heavenly purpose on earth. Buildings are, thus, subjected to serve together with their occupants an elevated order of things and meanings. They are to be both the means and ground for worship, which is man's principal task. Though serving him and his wants, God's vicegerent on earth always sees his buildings in an additional light, not seen by those who are bogged down with and blinded by fervently pursuing some lowly material gains. He sees them as an extension of the existing universal setting, God's physical realm, where all components, irrespective of their sizes, functions or positions, incessantly worship God. Buildings are, thus, seen as serving God, rather than man. Their services to man, even though genuine and real, are rather relative. Because the whole universe constitutes a mosque (*masjid*) with everything in it, save a group of men and *Jinns*, voluntarily singing in unison God's praises and celebrating His glory with neither fatigue nor boredom ever befalling them, Islamic architecture aspires to add to this exhilarating set-up. It aspires to endorse the divine spiritual standards and expands them to the spheres of human influences, thus, making them more easily approachable and perceptible by more people with different interests and

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23 Gulru Necipoglu, ed., *Sinan's Autobiographies, Five Sixteenth-Century Texts*, with introductory notes, critical editions and translations by Howard Crane and Esra Akin (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2006).

aptitudes. Hence, Islamic architecture, apart from facilitating man's vicegerency mission, also promotes as well as spawns people's interest in it.

When Mawlay Idris decided to build the city of *Fas* (Fez) in northern Africa (Morocco), having sketched the ground-plan of the city and before construction got underway, he recited the following prayer:

O my Lord! You know that I do not intend by building this city to gain pride or to show off; nor do I intend hypocrisy, or reputation, or arrogance. But I want You to be worshipped in it, Your laws, limits and the principles of Your Qur'an and the guidance of Your Prophet to be upheld in it, as long as this world exists. Almighty, help its dwellers to do righteousness and guide them to fulfill that. Almighty, prevent them from the evil of their enemies, bestow Your bounties upon them and protect them from the sword of evil. You are able to do all things.<sup>24</sup>

### **Peaceful and sustainable coexistence between the environment and architecture**

The Islamic notions of man as the vicegerent on earth and the natural environment as the field of man's vicegerency mission give Islamic architecture its conspicuous identity. It also creates in Muslims an unprecedented spirituality-loaded outlook on building activities so that the highest level of compatibility between buildings and their users exists. Islamic spirituality ensures that Islamic architecture and Muslims forge a productive, peaceful and sustainable alliance. They all originated from the same source and serve the same ontological purpose. The character of Islamic architecture is

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24 Ahmad Farid Moustapha, "Islamic Values in Contemporary Urbanism," unpublished paper presented at the First Australian International Islamic Conference, organised by the Islamic Society of Melbourne, Eastern Region (ISOMER), 1986.

such that it tries its best to disguise its mundane naturalistic factors and features that may hinder a beholder's focus pointing, in turn, to a higher order of expression and meaning. The beholder's attention is directed towards the desired end by various ingenious artistic and structural ways and methods which are meant to yield an intuition of the real essence of the Transcendent and its Divine infinity and perfection.

Since God is the Creator and Lord of everything, including man, He too is the actual Owner of everything. To God belongs everything in the universe. As far as man is concerned, though being elevated to the degree of God's vicegerent on earth and to whom all things have been subjected, he still possesses nothing. Everything around him has been loaned to him so that he, in a responsible and unhindered manner, can carry out his duties of vicegerency, no more than that. Even his very self, that is, his life, is not his to own. It belongs to his Creator, and if needed, he is to sacrifice it for Him and His cause.

No sooner does man come into this world than he sets out to display his inherent readiness to take from this world: to breathe, to dress, to drink, albeit without possessing anything, save his very self, to give away in return. Man is, therefore, born as an insolvent consumer. Not only does he own nothing, he also remains forever short of enjoying a power of bringing into being anything without making use of the available raw materials and elements created for him in nature. Creating *ex nihilo* (from absolute nothingness), as a sign of genuine richness, sovereignty and might, is the right and power of God alone. Indeed, everything that man invents, conceives, concocts and creates is possible only, thanks to the unbounded bounties and munificence from God, which man only discovers, manages, processes, uses and reuses in different ways most convenient and efficient for him. The upshots of man's myriad civilisational pursuits on earth are never really

his own possession and, as such, by no means could be solely utilised for returning the debt of creation and existence to God. Hence, being prudent, modest and grateful when dealing with both God's Gifts and one's own accomplishments, are some of the virtues most appreciated, and the opposite are some of the vices most detested, in man. As far as the built environment is concerned, this translates as sustainability and sustainable development. God is, thus, to be acknowledged all the time and in every interest of man as the final end, as the ultimate object of all desire, as the ultimate source of all goodness, of all value. It is God who makes every other good; He is the highest good for the sake of Whom every good thing is good.<sup>25</sup>

Allāh says on this in the Qur'ān:

They say: "Allāh has begotten a son". Glory be to Him. Nay, to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him. To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a matter, He says to it: "Be," and it is.<sup>26</sup>

Do you not know that Allāh's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that besides Allāh you have no guardian or helper?<sup>27</sup>

A revelation from Him Who created the earth and the high heavens. The Beneficent Allāh is firm in power. His is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth and what is between them two and what is beneath the ground.<sup>28</sup>

Allāh explicitly says that He is the Creator and thus the Owner of everything including people and whatever they are able to make. People's creations

25 Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1995).

26 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 116-117.

27 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 107.

28 *Tā Hā* (20): 4-6.



and possessions are in fact Allāh's: "And Allāh has created you and what you make."<sup>29</sup>

This philosophy is strikingly clear also in the field of architecture. When building an edifice, the Muslim architect and structural engineer charged with the vicegerency spirit are, first and foremost, concerned about how the end result of their efforts will stand out when juxtaposed with the existing universal setting, a result of heavenly artistry, in terms of both function and outward appearance: will it complement or contrast with it; will it go well with it, or will it appear as if something of a misfit, oddity, or even offensiveness; will it be sustainable?

### **Function**

With regard to function, the Muslim architect always exerts himself to ensure that a new structure serves a noble purpose, regardless if it is a mosque, school, dwelling, caravanserai, hospital, fountain, mausoleum, whereby God alone is meant to be worshipped and adored. In this way, every new structure, even though man-made, signifies, as it were, a conformation and even an enhancement of the aura generated by the character and role of the natural world. Instead of standing alone amidst the marvels of God's creation, quite alien to them, a structure rather integrates itself with them as much as its plan, design and utility are able to suggest, identifying its status vis-à-vis the otherworldliness with that of the natural sensations around it.

Building materials and substances used in building processes are normally taken or "borrowed" from nature. The same materials, heretofore, belonged to the flawlessly executed universal web singing God's praises and celebrating His

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29 *Al-Şāffāt* (37): 96.

glory. Although they have been removed from their original contexts, the building materials from nature are still utilised for some other perfectly fitting goals related to man, thereby causing their intrinsic "holy pursuit" to remain unaffected or perturbed. As a result of the Muslim's restricted and controlled intervention in nature, only did the original condition and context of natural building materials and substances change, which is nevertheless expected, needed and in full accordance with God's universal will and plan. The inherent functions of those building materials and substances remain the same.

Before they are used, building materials from nature worship God in unison with the rest of nature's components. It is, thus, only fair that they are used in those buildings where God is worshipped as well, so that their unremitting acts are still performed in peace and without interruption. It sounds strange but it would be an act of injustice towards nature if some of its ingredients were used for erecting buildings wherein the authority of God will be disrespected and His words contravened. Besides, such a deed would also denote that a contribution toward upsetting the fine equilibrium in nature has been made. When the Prophet declared that "there is neither harming nor reciprocating of harm," he had in mind not only human beings, but also the natural world with all its components. Indeed, it is a form and degree of harm when the spiritual paradigms of nature are perturbed, just as it is harmful to abuse the physical aspects on nature's kingdom. The mentioned words of the Prophet implied, furthermore, that our built environments must be sustainable, that is, they do not generate any harm to either people or their natural surroundings. A built environment is to be an asset, not a liability, to all of its users.

It stands to reason that as man is very much capable of perturbing the physical laws of nature by his actions, so is he in a position to get in the way of the covert aspects of nature's

existence, as much as God allows it. Therefore, while creating buildings, and by extension, frameworks and fields for their activities, God's vicegerents wish not to contravene any of the universe's spiritual laws and patterns. On the contrary, they wish to enhance them forever by remaining on friendly terms with them. Certainly, a building can be either a "friend" or an "antagonist" to its animate and inanimate neighbours.

Indeed, as the vicegerent on earth endowed with free will, man, while interacting with his surroundings, taking and giving, is in a position both to sustain and damage the existing natural equilibrium. This depends on the choice and life orientation as well as purpose man chooses. This is applicable not only to the physical aspects of the natural world, but also to the metaphysical or spiritual paradigms of whole existence. In other words, Islām does not speak only about physical sustainability on earth, it is also about a spiritual one throughout the realms of the vast universe, which God's vicegerents on earth must be fully aware of and must readily aim for. Such, it could be inferred, is the supreme goal of man's divine mission. Such, furthermore, is a clear measure of man's success or failure in his vicegerency undertaking.

Finally, Islamic buildings, as the Qur'ān confirms, are erected and sustained upon a foundation of piety to God and His good pleasure, because the lives of their benefactors too are built on piety and hopes for God's pleasure. In contrast, the buildings of those who turn away from God are erected upon a foundation of suspicion, faithlessness, false hopes and fears, just as their lives are built upon the like foundation. While the lives and buildings of believers, in spiritual terms, are strong and firm for the obvious reasons, the lives and buildings of non-believers, for obvious reasons too, are weak, insecure and shaky. God then asks:

Is he who founded his building upon duty to Allāh

and His good pleasure better; or he who founded his building on the brink of a crumbling, overhanging precipice so that it toppled with him into the fire of hell? Allāh guides not wrongdoing folk. The building which they built will never cease to be a misgiving in their hearts unless their hearts be torn to pieces. Allāh is the Knower, the Wise.<sup>30</sup>

## Form

As regards the form of erected structures, the Muslim builder, powered with the spirit of *tawhīd* and a desire to fulfil the will of a higher order or cause, always tries his best to make his edifices come into sight adhering to the existing spiritual paradigms of the natural environment. Nature is the perceptible sign of the Creator's will and presence, which is as evident in the most trivial as in the most splendid. Thus, every new component of built environment ought to become, in a way, a "sign" itself, lest they become irreconcilable with both nature and the spiritual and psychological disposition of their users. Islamic architecture is to be seen as a man-made "sign" amid the signs of God in nature.

Humans must live on friendly terms with nature, as much as such an arrangement is possible, beneficial and needed. Under no circumstances can man in any endeavour of his declare a war on the natural environment, because, on account of many a physical, mental and emotional weakness of his and his actual total dependence on the environment, man and nobody else is bound to emerge at all times as a dire loser. The natural environment is simultaneously an obstruction and help, and architects seek both to invite its aid and to drive back its attacks. If rightly conceived and seriously pondered, the placement and form of edifices in relation to their sites with arrangement of their axes and spaces may well be turned

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30 *Al-Tawbah* (9): 109-110.

into a device for controlling natural light, ventilation, heating, cooling, insulation, acoustics, and others. The same philosophy is to be attached—perhaps in a more forceful and compelling mode—to the spiritual dimension of the relationship between the built and natural environment, as it concerns one’s well-being in both this world and in the Hereafter. Because it goes along with the objectives of the Islamic *Shari‘ah* (Law), peaceful and harmonious coexistence with nature, in the spiritual sense of the term, was furthermore, at the core of the Muslim’s religious existence.

In view of the fact that Islamic architecture bears a strong spiritual impression and is one of the means for espousing the cause of Islām, it did not really always matter in the history of Islamic civilisation who the builders, planners and developers of many a project were. What actually mattered was whether the ultimate roles and utility of such projects were justifying the time, effort and capital spent on them, as well as what their impact was on the existing state of the community and on its future progress. Although architecture as a profession was extremely important and honoured, architects, most of the time, have not been excessively venerated, neither by their patrons nor by the public. It was for this reason that on most of Islamic buildings, no names of their builders were inscribed. If there was anything imprinted on them, then it was the date of their commencement or completion, or the name of the ruler or the patron. Except in cases of insincere undertakings, never were the architects, planners or developers concerned about promoting their name or status, about their position in history, about what some short-sighted people would say about their work, about how some members of the ruling elite would react during and after construction, and so forth.

This indicates that buildings in Islām are erected to serve, together with their occupants, the only Creator and Lord of the universe. As a result, buildings in Islamic

architecture are heavily transfigured, aiming to negate their mundane worldly ingredients and stand out as the man-made “signs” of God’s Oneness and Greatness. Also, Muslim architects and structural engineers turned down a prospect of drawing attention to themselves, their careers and their works of art. They feared that such an act would somewhat impinge on and, in the worst scenario, debilitate the promotion of the idea of total spirituality underlining the total identity of Islamic architecture. Nothing was to stand between God and a building’s users and observers. Through various channels and means—the planning and organisation of spaces in buildings, the handling of buildings’ forms, the methods and styles of ornamentation and beautification in buildings, the envisioned functions of buildings—Muslim architects and structural engineers go all-out to put on view the signs of the Creator’s Presence, Infinite Authority and Greatness, on the one hand, and to display the signs of men’s fragility, dependence and smallness, on the other. This way, every building in Islamic architecture is transformed into a kind of a house of God, *Baytullāh*, thus, translating onto reality the implications of the Prophet’s tradition (*ḥadīth*) that the earth has been made as pure and a place of worship (*masjid*) to the Prophet and his followers.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion: Pragmatism in practising Islamic architecture**

Islām is a complete way of life. Its values and teachings, together with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, whose primary task was to explain to mankind and put into practice the precepts of Islām, are universal and timeless. The significance of Islamic architecture is universal and permanent too in that the philosophy that it embodies is the Islamic one.

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31 *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, tradition no. 323.

However, such is the nature of Islamic architecture that it is receptive to both advances in science and technology and the dictates of people's living conditions. When discussing the need to restore the role and status of Islamic architecture in the world today, we must pay attention to the causes that will invariably lead us to the desired effects. One of the most important causes, certainly, will be our proper understanding of Islām: its teachings, history and civilisation, coupled with the Islamisation of ourselves and our societies.

Central to the understanding of the identity of Islamic architecture, as both a concept and sensory reality, is the understanding of the Islamic concepts of man and the environment. This is so because it is man who perceives, creates and uses architecture. It is man who produces or destroys architecture. It is man who enjoys or suffers from architecture. Furthermore, architecture and the natural environment are inseparable, at both the conceptual and practical planes. The environment holds enormous potential and diversified resources meant only for man, God's vicegerent on earth. They are to be seen as the facilities which facilitate each and every aspect of man's fleeting stay on earth. The environment is further to be seen by man as an "ally" or a "partner," in the execution of his earthly mission. After all, in order to create an architecture, man borrows diverse natural ingredients, such as space, water, clay, timber, stone and other minerals, placing the newly created or built elements back into the existing natural contexts. In other words, the built environment is in so many ways the natural environment that has been borrowed, utilised, manipulated and processed. Man himself constitutes a part of the universal natural setting. It goes without saying that some of the most prominent features of Islamic architecture must always be as follows: it is heavily loaded with the Islamic spirituality; it is economic and safe; it is user-friendly; it is environment-friendly; and, it is sustainable.

It is the nature of Islām that provides humanity with basic rules of morality and guidelines of proper conduct in those spheres of life which are not related to prescribed ritual worship, such as the spheres of building, planning and general development, for example. Upon such general principles and guidelines, people can establish systems, regulations, views and attitudes in order to comprehend and regulate their worldly life in accordance with their time, region and needs. Since every age and geographic location have their own problems and challenges, the solutions and perceptions deduced from the fundamental principles and permanent values of life have got to be, to some extent, different. Their substance, however, due to the uniformity and consistency of the divinely given foundation and sources from which they stem, will always be the same. Islām is based on essential human nature, which is constant and not subject to change according to time and space. It is the outward forms which change while the fundamental principles, the basic values and the essential human nature together with men's basic needs remain unchanged.

It is an imperative that Muslim architects always remember these verities while trying to revive and sustain the concept of sustainability in the architecture of the Muslim world. In so doing, Muslim architects are bidden firstly, to identify the general Islamic guidelines and principles pertaining to the enterprise of sustainable building, on top of which, are those related to the notions of man and the environment in Islām. Next, they must be fully aware of the implications of the dilemmas and challenges their time and the diverse regions, in which they live, entail. They cannot be trapped in a historical episode, overly romanticising it and attempting to emulate the architectural solutions the Muslims of that particular period successfully evolved. If something was the norm during a period and in a particular ecological setting, such, by no means, can be the same in every subsequent period and in



different ecological settings. Technological advancements rapidly change; demands of different eras fluctuate, even under the same ecological conditions; climate exigencies must be painstakingly heeded; and, lastly, human psychology also changes with the change of time and space, posing a number of exigencies of its own. No architectural plan and design which served as a solution for an age and place can be simply “parachuted” to another age and place without properly modulating it to its rigorous environmental and socio-cultural requirements. To do that is to betray the dynamic spirit of both the common sense and the perpetual message of Islām. Blind and ignorant imitations and following, even in sheer religious matters, are categorically rebuked by Islām.

While taking hold of the general Islamic guidelines and principles with reference to creating a sustainable architecture, on the one hand, and while studying the needs of different times and situations so that the former can be accurately understood and applied, on the other, Muslim architects in reality perform a degree of *ijtihād*, that is, forming an independent opinion or judgment within the framework of an available text. In doing so, if one excels, one receives two rewards from God, but if one, for whatever reason, fails to deliver, after he had tried his best, one is bound to receive one reward from God.

Based on this divine principle, in no way can a serious, enlightened, accountable and willing person be a loser as far as the execution of matters ordained by God is concerned. He can never be wrong. Verily, this divine assurance should serve to Muslim architects and designers as a starting point to look carefully and critically at the state of architecture and how buildings in the Muslim world are planned and designed, as well as to start contemplating the prospects of finding much better sustainability solutions which will be inspired by and infused with the values of Islām, and will be responsive to the exigencies of different times and regions. It was due to this

remarkable spiritual dimension in Islamic architecture that Sinan, the chief architect of the Ottoman golden age, once said that the first requirement for properly practising the estimable calling of architecture is righteousness and piety.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, there is no such a thing as a standardised Islamic architecture which can be reproduced anytime and anywhere. If truth be told, there is nothing as such in the whole body of the Islamic-built environment. Therefore, Muslim architects and designers should not hesitate to unleash their burning Islamic spirit, desire, imagination and creativity, in order to conceive and create such an architectural tradition that will be compatible with the requirements of both the religious message and modernity. Undoubtedly, the given solutions will have to vary from one region to another, somewhere more and somewhere less. But the essence of all the possible designs and solutions will remain always one, because of the same worldview and the same religious spirit and foundation that underpin the presence of Muslims and bind all the Muslim peoples regardless of their different geographical locations, cultures and historical appearances. Hence, among the chief characteristics of Islamic architecture are sustainability and the concept of unity in diversity, that is, the unity of message, orientation and purpose, and the diversity of styles, methods, solutions and the overall implementation mechanisms.

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32 Necipoglu, *Sinan's Autobiographies*.